

Año Nuevo

State Park



Our Mission

The mission of California State Parks is to provide for the health, inspiration and education of the people of California by helping to preserve the state's extraordinary biological diversity, protecting its most valued natural and cultural resources, and creating opportunities for high-quality outdoor recreation.



California State Parks supports equal access. Prior to arrival, visitors with disabilities who need assistance should contact the park at (650) 879-2025. This publication can be made available in alternate formats. Contact interp@parks.ca.gov or call (916) 654-2249.

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Discover the many states of California.™

Año Nuevo State Park

Highway 1 at New Years Creek Road

20 Miles North of Santa Cruz

Pescadero, CA 94060

(650) 879-2025

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*Rugged Año Nuevo
Point draws visitors from
around the world to
witness elephant seals
mate, give birth and rest
from long sea voyages.*



Fifty-five miles south of San Francisco and the Golden Gate Bridge, a low, rocky, windswept point juts out into the Pacific Ocean. This promontory was named *Punta del Año Nuevo* (New Year's Point) for the day Don Sebastian Vizcaíno first sighted it on January 3, 1603.

Between December and late March, northern elephant seals come ashore to rest, mate and give birth on the beaches, sand dunes and nearby offshore island.

The sight of huge male elephant seals battling for mating rights is a unique and unforgettable natural spectacle that thousands of visitors come to witness each year.

PARK HISTORY

Native People

When Sebastian Vizcaíno first saw what is now Año Nuevo Point, the area had already been occupied for thousands of years by the Quiroste people, a group of Ohlone Indians who lived here seasonally.

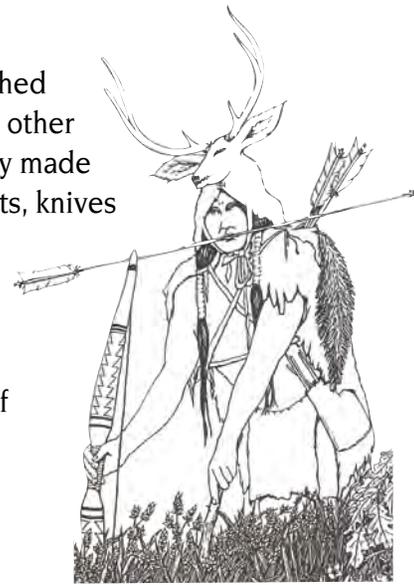
The Quiroste hunted, fished and gathered abalone and other shellfish from the sea. They made their spear and arrow points, knives and scrapers from chert gathered from the beach.

The park's Quiroste Valley Cultural Preserve safeguards the remnants of native Ohlone presence.

European Contact

The Ohlone people's first contact with non-natives came in 1769, when the Spanish military commander of the Californias, Gaspar de Portolá, traveled overland to the area north of today's San Francisco Bay.

After the 1791 founding of Mission Santa Cruz, hundreds of Ohlone—including the Quiroste—were baptized and brought into the mission. Some Ohlone people who survived the Spanish mission system eventually mixed with the larger culture



*Drawing of Ohlone hunter
by Mark Hylkema, 1987*

of Mexican California. The Ohlone have kept their ancient cultural traditions alive.

Año Nuevo, used as pasture land by the missionaries, became a rancho in 1842 when Governor Juan Alvarado granted 17,753 acres to his uncle, Don José Simeon de Nepomuceno Castro of Monterey.

American Settlers

In 1851, Castro's heirs sold the rancho to frontiersman Isaac Graham. Ten years later the land was bought by brothers Isaac, George, and Edgar Steele, whose dairy

operated for about 80 years. The barns and other historic buildings at Año Nuevo date from the Steele Brothers Dairy era.

After World War II, the dairy industry changed. Row-crop farming took the place of dairy cattle, thanks to new irrigation technology. Segments of the Monterey cypress windbreaks that the farmers planted still survive.



Elephant seal colony in January

Año Nuevo Island

As ship traffic increased along the coast in the mid-1800s, the shoreline became recognized as exceptionally dangerous to shipping—particularly the foggy, rock-strewn area between Año Nuevo and Pigeon Point. In 1872, the federal government installed a fog whistle on the island and added a five-story light tower in 1890.

An automatic buoy replaced the light tower in 1948, eliminating the need for lighthouse staff. The former keeper's residence has been maintained in a state of arrested decay since 1948.

The State of California acquired Año Nuevo Island and a strip of mainland in 1958. To protect the wildlife that nests and breeds there, Año Nuevo Island is closed to the public. In 1985, 2,980 adjacent acres of coastal mountains from the former Cascade Ranch were added to the park.

GEOLOGY

The surf-resistant rock that forms Año Nuevo Point is known as the Monterey

Formation. Starting as sedimentary clay and silt laid down beneath the sea 12 or 13 million years ago, it has gradually changed into a thinly layered mudstone, common throughout the Coast Range.

The Monterey Formation was moved northward by tectonic activity along the San Gregorio Fault Zone, which cuts through the park. Small faults associated with the major fault zone are visible in the cliff face along the park's south shore. Año Nuevo Island is part of the marine terrace that enters the sea from below the Santa Cruz Mountains.

The terrace's westerly portion is covered by sand dunes that are being driven from north to south by northwesterly winds. This 300- to 350-acre dune field is one of the few remaining active dune fields on the California coast. Here at Año Nuevo, the dunes have been changing character as a result of decreased sand availability.

PLANT LIFE

The diverse habitats at Año Nuevo enable various plant species to be successful.

Deep-rooted willow thickets spring up amid grasses where drifting sand is trapped. The prevalent tree species—Monterey pines, coast redwoods and Douglas-firs—thrive in this coastal environment.

Bushy perennials like mock heather, bush lupine and lizardtail dot the sand dunes. Sand verbena, beach burr

and colorful annuals, such as evening primrose and California poppies, provide cover and food for mice, rabbits, insects and other small animals.

ANIMAL LIFE

The Elephant Seals

Perhaps the single most compelling attraction for visitors is the large colony of northern elephant seals that assembles here each winter. Named for their large size and their long, pendulous noses, elephant seals were slaughtered wholesale in the 1800s for the oil that could be rendered from their blubber.

By 1892, fewer than 200 individual seals existed, living on the remote island of Guadalupe off the coast of Baja California. In 1922 the Mexican government gave protected status to the elephant seals, and the United States followed suit a few years later when the seals began to appear off the southern California coast.

Año Nuevo Island's first elephant seals arrived in 1955; the first pup was born there in 1961. Males hauled onto the mainland in 1965, and the first known mainland birth came ten years later. The number of elephant seals breeding and giving birth on the mainland still grows. Since their protected status began, elephant seals continue to multiply. Their breeding range extends as far north as Point Reyes.

Breeding Season

Elephant seals spend most of their lives at sea and come ashore only to molt, give birth and mate.



Marine Education Center



Elephant seal pup with mother

The first males arrive at Año Nuevo in December. Weighing close to 2½ tons, huge bulls engage in violent battles to establish dominance. The successful bulls do much of the breeding; most of the responsibility falls on the “alpha” bull at the top of the social ladder.

In early December, 800- to 1,600-pound females begin to arrive and form “harems” on the beaches. Three to six days later, they give birth to the pups conceived the previous year. One pup is born to each female, nursing for an average of 28 days.

Feeding on its mother’s rich milk (up to 55% fat), the pup grows from about 75 pounds at birth to 250-300 pounds in less than a month. Females may mate several times before returning to the ocean, abruptly weaning their pups by deserting them. By mid-March, most of the adult seals are gone, leaving the pups behind.

The pups then molt their original black fur, which is replaced by a shiny new silver coat. Soon they begin learning to swim in the shallow offshore waters. By the end of

April, they have begun to head northward in the Pacific Ocean to forage for food.

Molting Season

Between April and November, elephant seals return to the beaches of Año Nuevo in smaller numbers (based on their age and sex) to molt. This “catastrophic” molt takes approximately 30 days, during which the seal sheds its outer skin layer with fur and whiskers.

Other Pinnipeds

Pinnipeds are marine mammals with finlike feet or flippers. Año Nuevo is a vital rookery and resting area for more than the largest of the pinnipeds—northern elephant seals.

Tawny brown Steller sea lions breed on the rocky outer portions of Año Nuevo Island. Large numbers of dark brown California sea lions often haul ashore, but very few breed on the island. The incessant bark of male sea lions travels for miles.

Harbor seals live on the island all year, breeding in April and May. Their heads bob in the surf just off the park’s beaches. On offshore rocks, they are identifiable by the mottled pattern of their coats.

Other Marine Life

Throughout spring, the telltale 10- to 15-foot spouts of California gray whales may be visible as they pass the point on their annual migration between their winter breeding grounds and their summer feeding range in the Bering Sea.

Visitors may spot sea otters offshore, diving for food or floating on their backs. Like elephant seals, otters are returning from near-extinction to reoccupy their former range. Sea otter mothers and pups returned to Año Nuevo in the early 1980s—the first sea otters to enter this immediate area in more than a century.

Tide pools at Año Nuevo teem with more than 300 species of invertebrates, some quite rare. Common life forms include clams, abalone, limpets, hermit crabs and anemones. Nutrients from seal and sea lion waste fertilize the lush aquatic plant growth that feed the rockfish and bottom fish offshore.



Año Nuevo Island is home to an abandoned lighthouse station, birds and many pinnipeds.

BIRDWATCHER'S DELIGHT

American kestrels
Black turnstones
Black-bellied
plovers
Black-shouldered
kites
Brown pelicans
Bushtits
Cinnamon teals
Finches
Gulls
Grebes
Hummingbirds
Loons
Mallards
Marsh wrens
Meadowlarks
Northern harriers
Pintails
Plovers
Quail
Red-tailed hawks



Red-winged
blackbirds
Sanderlings
Sandpipers
Sparrows
Swallows
Swifts
Terns
Thrushes
Towhees
Turnstones
Vireos
Warblers
Wigeons
Willetts
Wrentits

Some of those amphibians sharing the wetland habitat are California red-legged frogs, another endangered species. Coastal development and competition from much larger, non-native bullfrogs have greatly diminished these frogs' numbers, but fortunate visitors may spot one.

MARINE PROTECTED AREA

The coastal waters off the park comprise the Año Nuevo State Marine Conservation Area, one of 15 that the Marine Life Protection Act (MLPA) legislatively safeguards along the Central Coast. No living marine resources may be taken. MLPA maps and boundaries may be viewed at www.dfg.ca.gov/mlpa.

ABOUT YOUR VISIT

Seals are here year-round. In spring and summer, elephant seals return in order to molt. Females, juveniles, sub-adult males and adult males visit from April to August.

Yearling seals haul ashore in the fall. From December 1 to 14, the restricted Natural Preserve area is closed to allow pregnant females undisturbed beach access. Breeding takes place from December through March.

From December 15 to March 31, you can see the elephant seals only on one of the regularly scheduled guided walks that minimize disturbance to the animals and their natural habitat. The 2½-hour, three-mile walks are conducted by volunteer naturalists. Advance reservations are recommended and can be made as early as October. From April through November, hiking permits are required to enter the restricted areas at Año Nuevo Point and are issued first-come, first-served at the park.

For general information on the elephant seal walks, phone (650) 879-0227. For seal walk reservations, phone (800) 444-4445.

Land Animals

Nocturnal bobcats, mountain lions, coyotes, foxes, weasels, bats and black-tailed deer thrive here.

Coast garter snakes, rubber boas and western yellow-bellied racers prey on small rodents and insects. Considered one of the rarest and most beautiful snakes in North America, the turquoise, red and orange San Francisco garter snake inhabits marshy areas and feeds on amphibians.



Guided tour at viewing area, Año Nuevo Point

MARINE EDUCATION CENTER

The historic Steele Brothers Dairy barn is now the park's accessible Marine Education Center. The educational and interpretive facility and nearby theater comprise 7,480 feet of exhibit and classroom space with podcasts, webcams and multi-media demonstrations of Año Nuevo's rich natural and cultural history.

ACCESSIBLE FEATURES

The Equal Access Trail, a .27-mile boardwalk, offers views of the elephant seals. A wheelchair-accessible van transports visitors from the parking lot to the Equal Access trailhead. Van tour reservations are required; call (650) 879-2033 from December 1 until March 15.

Accessible parking, restrooms, and a picnic area are near the accessible Marine Education Center. Beach wheelchairs are also available.

NEARBY STATE PARKS

- Pigeon Point Light Station SHP
210 Pigeon Point Road, Highway 1,
Pescadero 94060 (650) 879-2120
- Big Basin Redwoods SP
21600 Big Basin Way, Boulder Creek 95006
(831) 338-8860
- Butano SP
1500 Cloverdale Road, Pescadero 94060
(650) 879-2040

This park is supported in part through a nonprofit organization.

For more information contact:

San Mateo Coast

Natural History Association

New Years Creek Road

Pescadero, CA 94060

www.smcnha.com

Photo courtesy of Frank S. Balthis



PLEASE REMEMBER

- Contact the park for current access information for the Natural Preserve area.
- All gates are locked at sunset daily.
- Año Nuevo Island is closed at all times to public access.
- Except for service animals, dogs are not allowed in the park and must not be left inside vehicles in the parking lot.
- Harassment or disturbance of wild animals is prohibited by state and federal law.
- All natural and cultural features are protected by state law.
- Fires of all types are prohibited.

WARNING:

ELEPHANT SEALS ARE DANGEROUS

Elephant seals are unpredictable and faster than they appear to be. Even on land, they are extremely mobile for short distances. The head, which is drawn back to the shoulders at rest, can be extended two or three feet for a quick bite, and their large canine teeth can inflict serious wounds. Battles for dominance between bulls are among the bloodiest of any species. Bulls can crush a person with their two- to three-ton weight.

STAY AT LEAST 25 FEET AWAY FROM ALL SEALS.

Año Nuevo State Park

Legend

- Major Road
- Paved Road
- Unpaved/Service Road
- Trail: Hike
- Accessible Trail/Boardwalk
- Natural Preserve
- Restricted Access (by guided walk or permit only)
- Marine Protected Area
- Accessible Feature
- Bridge
- Ranger Station
- Locked Gate
- Lookout Point
- No Public Access
- Park Building
- Parking
- Picnic Area
- Restrooms

